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ABSTRACT

Although most of the national concern about violence has focused on major cities, no community is free from violence. Violent acts in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas may not be as severe as in urban areas, yet they exist. The Profiles of Student Life survey of 47,000 students in grades 6-12 included questions about violent behavior. The students surveyed lived in places with populations smaller than 50,000, mostly in the Midwest. By their reports, 55 percent of respondents had been involved in at least one of the following types of violence during the previous year: hit or beat up someone, vandalism, group fighting, hurt someone badly, or used a weapon to get something from another person. In addition, 28 percent had been involved in two or more of these acts, and 13 percent had been involved in three or more. Males were significantly more violence-prone than females. Youth violence was significantly associated with risk-taking behaviors involving drinking, substance abuse, and sexual activity, and with skipping school. Other research has found alarming percentages of teenagers who have been victims of physical or sexual abuse, and links the spread of youth violence to lack of family support and control, glorification of violence in our society, negative peer pressure, alcohol and drug use, problems in school, lack of educational aspirations, and children's heavy exposure to violence in the mass media. Now is the time to launch prevention strategies in middle America, before the self-perpetuating cycle of violence escalates further. (SV)

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Youth Violence in Middle America

by Peter L. Benson, Ph.D, and Eugene Roehlkepartain

The United States may be more aware of youth violence today than ever. Government statistics chart a steady increase in youth violent crime. The numbers are punctuated by frightening reports of violent incidents across the country. The point-blank shooting of two students in Brooklyn's Thomas Jefferson High School and the Los Angeles riots in the wake of the Rodney King verdict were two of the most galvanizing examples of the growing problem.

Most of the concern about violence has focused on major cities, where violence tends to be more common and more visible. Yet no community is free from violence. Though violent acts in suburbs, small towns, and rural areas may not be as severe as in urban areas, they exist. And unless those communities address the problem before it worsens, they too could face the entrenched crisis that now haunts urban areas.

Middle American realities

To get a sense of the scope of violence in middle America, we examined data from 47,000 sixth through twelfth graders in towns and cities smaller than 50,000 in population. Most of these communities are in the Midwest and mid-America states. These students all participated in a *Profiles of Student Life* survey through the RespecTeen program of Lutheran Brotherhood.

While it doesn't include the inner cities and includes only those young people who stay in school, this sample broadly represents "middle America" - that group of communities and people who have historically been thought to embody America's values, norms, and spirit. As such, the study's findings are quite disturbing.

Involvement in violence: By their reports, 55 percent of these sixth through twelfth graders have been involved in at least one of the following types of violence once or more in the past year:

Hit or beat up someone

Vandalism*

Group Fighting

Hurt someone badly enough to need bandages or a doctor

Used a weapon to get something from another person

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Troubling patterns of violence emerge for some youth. Twenty-eight percent have been involved in two or more of these violent acts in the past year. Thirteen percent have been involved in three or more of these acts. These young people appear, then, to be developing patterns of aggressive, antisocial behavior. While this study can't predict where this behavior will lead, it is certainly cause for alarm.

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Male involvement: Another trend in the data is that (as we would expect) males are significantly more violence-prone than females (though recent reports are highlighting increased levels of violence among females). Among males, 65 percent are involved in at least one violent behavior, compared to 45 percent of females. Even more troubling, one out of five males (21 percent)has been involved in three or more violent acts.

Grade differences: Examining the numbers by grade shows broader involvement in some types of violence among younger youth. Among sixth through eighth graders, 59 percent are involved in at least one of these behaviors. The percent declines to 52 percent for ninth through twelfth graders. This finding reflects that beating up someone and group fighting are higher in the middle grades (45 percent in sixth to eighth grades versus 35 percent in the ninth to twelfth grades); other types of behavior remain relatively constant across the grades.

Violence and other at-risk behaviors: Youth violence doesn't take place in isolation. For many youths, aggressiveness is part of an overall pattern of risky behavior. When we correlate these acts of violence with 15 other at-risk behaviors, we find significant correlations (0.20 or higher) with eight of them: alcohol use, binge drinking, cigarette use, sexual activity, not using contraception if sexually active, drinking and driving, riding with a drunk driver, and skipping school. At the same time, these relatively weak but significant correlations suggest that it's not just the "problem kids" who are engaging in violence. Although some of the violence is isolated - unrelated to other risky choices - these findings suggest that violence is becoming increasingly normative within youth culture.

Roots of violence

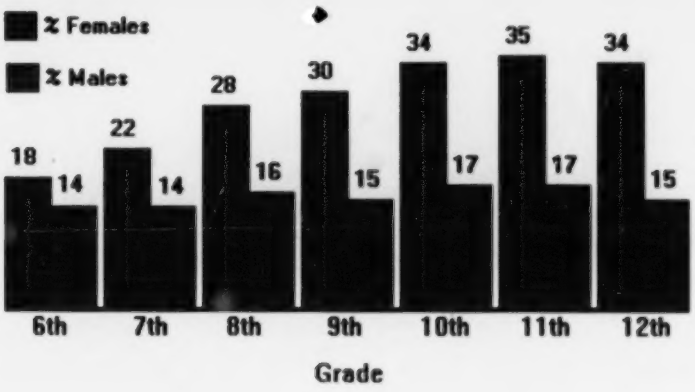
The number of explanations for the root causes of violence shows not only a diversity of viewpoints but also the complexity of the issue. It would be simplistic to attribute it to one or two factors. In fact, most experts admit they don't understand the complete picture.

Loss of "connectedness": It's not news that social changes in this century have left people feeling isolated and disconnected. In fact - as Arnold Goldstein of the Center for Research on Aggression at Syracuse University notes - our culture sets a tone that encourages self- centeredness and, in turn, violence. "We are a nation whose role models, presidents, and leaders on Wall Street have set the tone for the country - 'I'm going to get mine.'"

The Troubled Journey (a Search Institute survey) findings point to this individualism as a contributor to violent behaviors. It shows that youth who get involved in violent behaviors tend to have hedonistic, self-serving values. And they tend not to care about other people's feelings.

Youth as Victims of Violence

While it does not report general victimization, *The Troubled Journey* found alarming percentages of teenagers who are victims of physical or sexual abuse. The following chart shows the percentages of females and males who experience physical and/or sexual abuse.



Lack of family support and control: Many researchers trace violence to dramatic changes in families. In his report of the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development entitled *Fateful Choices: Healthy Youth for the 21st Century,* Fred M. Hechinger writes about the spread of youth violence: "The disintegration of the family . . . is a major root of the crisis."

Problems generally begin early in the family: Parents - who may be overburdened and self-absorbed - fail to give their children the nurture, guidance, and control they need early in life to help them develop compassion, establish attachments, and learn boundaries. The Troubled Journey shows, for example, that youth who don't engage in violence are more likely to spend time at home, have a positive family environment, feel that their parents are approachable, and have parents with standards of conduct.

A lack of support and control from home is compounded, in many cases, by physical abuse. Our data show a significant relationship between physical abuse and involvement in violence. Dorothy Otnow Lewis of New York University makes the same point. "Kids are being raised by more and more disturbed parents, " she explained to *Time.* "And what this lack of parenting breeds is misshapen personalities." As a consequence, these youth are left emotionally devastated, self-centered, angry, and alienated.

Erosion of values: Violence has become an accepted, even glorified, part of this culture. As they watch adults resolve conflicts, hear politicians posture, and interact with peers, young people too often see violence as the norm. In announcing violence as a "National health emergency" last summer, former U.S. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop spoke of "a grotesques picture of a society steeped in violence, especially by firearms." The problems also show up within families. Ball State University researchers Barbara Carson and Diane Danne found that 43 percent of 12- to 18-year-olds say it's okay for siblings of either sex to hit each other as a way of dealing with conflict. One out of six youth consistently approve of violence in the family. Not only is there no strong taboo against violence, but it can also easily become a mark of honor in some youth subcultures. This reality may explain why negative peer pressure correlates significantly with violent behavior. Extreme cases of youth violence jolt our sensibilities in this regard. Investigators in Chicago were able to find four youth who raped and killed a medical student because the four kept bragging to others about their crime. "It was a badge," the assistant state's attorney explained. "It was something they talked about as if it gave them status within this group of guys."

Alcohol and other drugs: The link between alcohol and other drugs to violent behavior is clear. The urban drug trade is just one symptom. Analysis of our sample shows that violent youth are more likely than others to attend drinking parties. Furthermore, five of the eight at-risk behaviors related to our index of violence involve the use of alcohol or other drugs.

Problems in school: Research shows a clear relationship between school problems and antisocial behavior. In our sample, youth who have engaged in violent acts are less likely to be motivated in school or to have educational aspirations beyond high school. Other studies show youth involved in antisocial behavior do more poorly in school

and don't complete homework.

Violence in the media: The influence of the media on violent behavior is hotly debated. In the end, though, media expert George Comstock asserts that media violence does have a significant impact on antisocial behavior, particularly when it is rewarded or left unpunished, portrayed without showing the pain and suffering that result, or portrayed as realistic.

Social philosopher Myriam Miedzian is more forceful: "By the time American kids are 18 years old they have watched 26,000 murders on television alone . . . . It is contrary to common sense and research to think you can create such a culture and not have any effects."

The consensus seems to be shifting toward Miedzian's perspective. After completing a 32-year study of the topic, Leonard Eron, chair of the American Psychological Association's commission on Violence and Youth, argues that "television violence affects youngsters of all ages, both genders, and all socioeconomic levels and levels of intelligence." Even more alarming , perhaps, is his finding that parents who grew up watching violent television are more likely to use violence in their own parenting.

Make a difference

Of course, the violence problem presented here focuses on communities where violence is less visible and less widespread. Some people might argue that kids hitting kids and a little random vandalism isn't that big a deal. Why worry about it?

But such a response fails to account for the self- perpetuating cycle of violence as well as the research on what prevents violence. It's clear, for example, that part of the problem is that many violent youth have grown up in families where parents dealt with conflict and anger in violent ways. Unless today's young people develop other patterns, it's likely that they will become the abusive parents of tomorrow.

Furthermore, as with most issues, prevention is more effective than intervention. Once youth get trapped in a violent world, it's much more difficult to get them out. Though youth in middle America aren't caught as often in the level of violence experienced in inner cities, now is the time to launch prevention strategies - before the violence escalates even further.

Violence has become a fact of life and, for some youth, a matter of survival. Middle America must directly address the issue. To do this, it must first recognize and accept its own role and stake in the urban setting. This would mean addressing the economic and societal issues underlying violence among urban youth. It would mean dealing with the prejudices that contribute to perpetuating the problem. But middle America must also recognize that no communities are completely immune from violence. Factors that lead to violence are present, and some young people are already engaging in violent acts. Confronting the reality is vital for keeping the problem from escalating even more.

Editor's Note:

* Some experts do not consider vandalism to be a violent act; therefore, data on the extent of violence may differ in other studies.

About the authors:
Peter L. Benson, Ph.D. has been director of Search Institute since 1985. Eugene Roehlkepartain is director of publication services for the Search Institute.

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